

GENERAL BURKETT'S DISCIPLE.

BY J. R. STAFFORD.

An Ignorant Man Is a Weak One,
But Strength is Often Disguised.



YEAH. It would take all the bread an' meat ye got there, mister, to fill me up. But I jist can't bear to eat when any one is watchin' me, so if it's jis' asame to you, I'll take the grub an' go off by myse'f to eat it." The rather foolish-faced, lanky, and ragged boy of twelve or thereabouts looked appealingly down into the hard eyes of Old Burkett.

Burkett, grizzled and unkempt—after the fashion of market hunters—squatting, huge bulked, before the fire on which a frying-pan sizzled, puckered his tufted gray brows in calculation as he looked from the lad to the big camp oven filled with new baked bread.

"Boys," he at last observed, "has no insides." Then he stared for a moment around the camp and suddenly exclaimed:

"Boy, ef ye air a tramp, w'y up an' say so. But ye needn't be one no more. I'm a needin' a boy powerful bad. 'Tain't the work so much as that I'm a gettin' old an' need a young an' handy feller to talk to of a night. W'y not jist stop 'ith me?"

Out of the rapture into which he had been thrown at sight of a gun leaning against the tent, the youth replied mechanically:

"Nope, I gotta go."

Burkett, smiling through his beard, spread the newspaper thoughtfully brought by the young vagrant, and on it dumped the ovenful; then, having poured over the bread the contents of the frying-pan, he made up a bundle, incomparably ungeometrical in shape. After a prideful survey of this he clutched it tightly and again persuaded.

"Boy, you air a passin' up a powerful good chance to make somethin' out o' yerse'f. A powerful good chance! I got a little double bar'l shotgun I'd give ye. An' I'd l'arn ye to decoy ducks an' geese an' shoot 'em on the fly. An' I'd show ye how to ketch fish in the summer an' mink an' muskrat in winter time. An' of a night we'd set by the fire an' I'd tell ye about the war an' Pickett's charge. An' by the time ye growed up, ye would be a man; 'stid o' jist a bum."

For a moment the youth's spaniel-eyes brightened on these vistas of delight, but the glow suddenly went out as, with a gulp and a look of fear, he exclaimed:

"Nope, I gotta go. I jist gotta go."

Burkett tossed him the bundle. Already moving off, he caught it and kept going as fast as his awkward legs would carry him. Underfoot, the corn-field, littered with last year's stalks, was deep with mud from the March rains, but he never stopped to rest, maintaining his ungainly trot until it had carried him the full half mile to the railroad track. There he vanished behind the tall grass fringing the right of way.

At that, the duck-hunter started in pursuit. He crossed the field in the boy's tracks and, approaching the railroad fence with noiseless step, at last put a steadying hand to a post and cocked his head to listen.

He heard the voices of men, and then crawled carefully between the wires. As he smashed his way through the screen of crackling stems and blades, three men lolling about a fire lifted their faces in lazy inquiry.

Obviously they were tramps. It was apparent also that they were now eating

a dinner at Burkett's expense, for their hands were clutching huge biscuits he had baked, and rinded bacon he had fried. Between them lay the newspaper, bare of everything but crumbs and a solitary half biscuit. Upon this remnant, the boy, who sat apart, was gazing in profound speculation.

Burkett understood. Without a word of warning he dashed at the feasters, now rising to their feet. Into their midst he shot with an ear-splitting screech. Like a bomb he seemed suddenly to explode, hurling terrific fists on every side. The assaulted went down together on the trampled grass, where they sat, gingerly feeling their bruises.

"Now," the victor commanded, "you boy; you come 'ith me. These fellers is no good. You jist stand right up now an' tell 'em they air a pack o' boy-robbin' skunks."

The lad, staring open-mouthed at the burliest of the trio, started to obey, and then trembling, stopped.

"Tell 'em whut I say," Burkett fairly boomed. "Ef they even dast to open their heads to ye, I'll give 'em a dang sight more!"

At that, in a kind of panic the youth dashed to the cover of the hunter's elbow, and from that redoubtable position not only repeated Burkett's characterization of the trio, but others of his own composition strangely picturesque and profane.

When the long-pent torrents had flowed till only the dregs of epithet remained, Burkett took him by the hand. Then the pair, having crawled back into the field, crossed it to the camp.

"Whut's yer name, boy?" the old man demanded as they entered the tent.

"Fellers called me Squib."

"Well, ye air a goin' to be more than any blank ca'tridge ef ye stay an' grow up 'ith me. I had army trainin' an' I hain't forgot it. I wuz a soldier under Pickett."

He paused, and a strange fire gleamed in his eyes as with shaking head he declared, "Boy, them days I wuz jist nach-erally hell an' repeat." But his glance softened as he concluded:

"I am a goin' to name ye Bob Jones, after the hoss I rode in Pickett's charge, an' all the good an' bad water span'l dawgs I've owned sense the war."

In this manner, the waif became Bob Jones, and his fortunes linked with those of Old Burkett.

When the fact became generally known up and down the Bottoms, the good people—for everywhere there are good people—generous to think and do, especially to think for others, made up their minds the boy should have a better chance, for to them Old Burkett's conduct in every particular shouted the very antithesis of their ideals.

They dwelt in fixed abodes, he roamed along the Missouri, sheltering in a tent. They planted and plowed and reaped, sweating with toil and worry, he merely hunted and trapped and fished, leisurely and carefree. They gave full weights of grain they had produced, he often artfully sold mud-hens for teal, bullheads for catfish, and, it was affirmed, had palmed off rabbit skins for muskrat hides.

After they had paid for the necessities of life they put the remainder of their money at interest, he invested his in whisky, or lemon extract, which went further.

On Sundays they went to town to sit soberly in the church and listen to sermons of peace, after which they cordially shook hands with even those they might have disliked. He came to parade the street drunkenly and collect a crowd of loafers, to whom he would boastfully tell of the war and Pickett's charge, in which he claimed to have actually killed one hundred of the enemy, and he would wind up then by daring any one to fight him. In short, he surpassed the ordinary type of river-rat in general worthlessness.

It was with these facts in mind that Deacon Smith got up in prayer-meeting one Wednesday evening and earnestly pleaded that the brand might be plucked from the burning. A newcomer, who did not know much about Old Burkett, but who made up for this trifling lack of knowledge in a courageous zeal for good works, volunteered to go to the camp and get the boy.

At the next meeting this one limped painfully to his pew. When experiences were in order he instantly rose and, with a blackened eye fixed sternly on the deacon, vehemently repudiated the mission he had so blithely pledged himself to perform.

Again the deacon pleaded eloquently, but no one volunteered. Then, being a conscientious man, he rather grudgingly signified his intention to go himself.

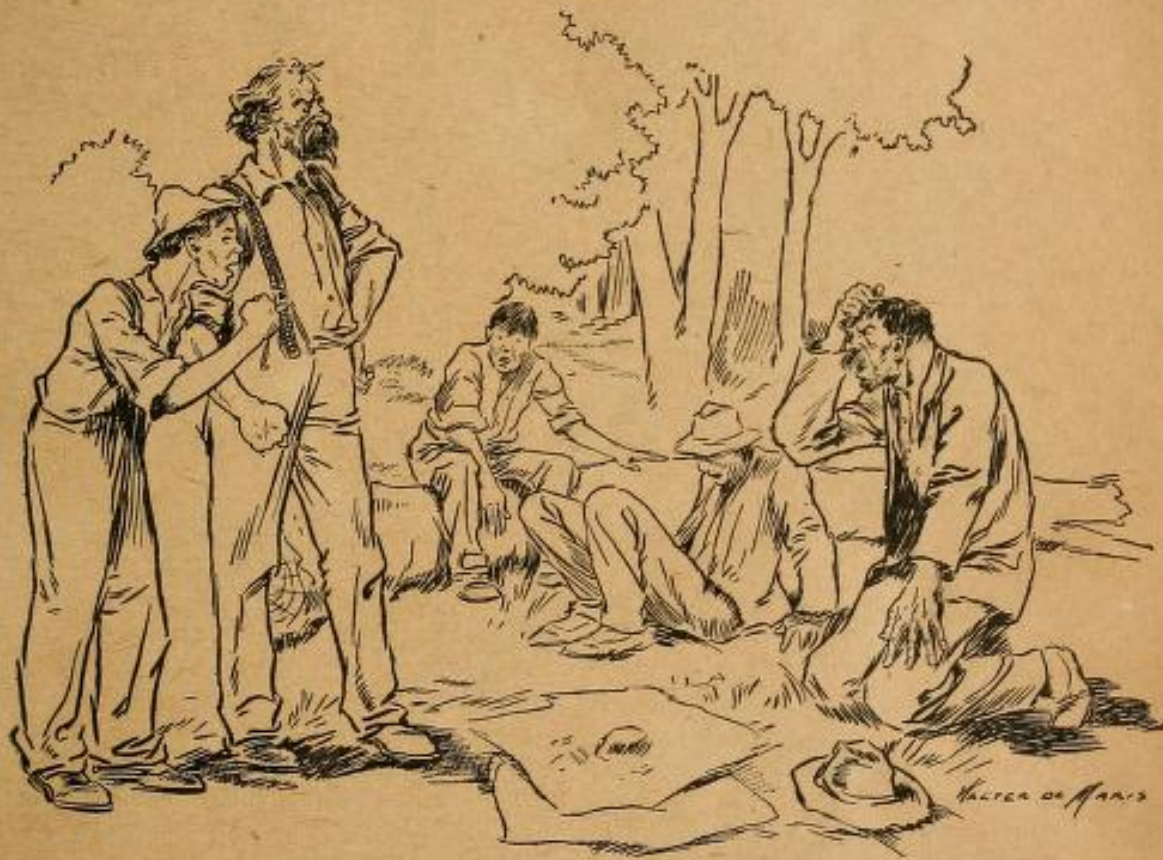
So, next day, with his gun on his shoulder, for he loved to hunt, he made his way to the river. As the mallards were flying well, he first attended to the business of killing a dozen or so of them. At noon he strode up to Old Burkett's camp. The man and boy were already there eating dinner.

"Burkett," the deacon spoke with a

the boy, to whom this golden opportunity had been offered, instead of embracing it, merely stuck out his tongue and wagged his head. Very naturally this offended the deacon, and very naturally, too, he exclaimed:

"If you don't come, I'll cut a switch an' tan your jacket."

"Umhu!" the refusing one dared, "you tetch me an' the general he'll make more'n a Christian man o' you. He'll make ye outrun yer dog a gittin' acrost that field."



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forced civility, "that boy ought to be in school."

"You an' him fur it, deacon. Ef 'e wants to go 'e kin go."

Astounded at the ease with which he had gained his end, the good man, somewhat pridefully shouldered his gun and commanded:

"Come with me, boy. I am goin' to take ye home and make a Christian man of ye."

He was now further astounded, for

At this, though roaring with laughter, Old Burkett began to roll up his sleeves.

"You have already corrupted him, mebbe beyond redemption," the deacon declared white-lipped—for he expected a beating—"but I shall go to the law. He sha'n't be your disciple no longer."

"All right, deacon," Burkett boomed with unexpected good humor, "I jist wisht ye would hoss us into the court."

Wherefore a couple of days afterward the sheriff came to the camp and took the

pair to the county seat, where county court was in session.

Now, the county judges were farmers, and they did not wish to put any new burden on the taxpayers. Moreover,

His sallow face flamed red, his brown eyes glowed like two coals from which a breath had swept the ash; and, jumping up and down in a kind of paroxysm, he screamed:



"HE'LL MAKE YE OUTFIT YER DOG A GITTIN' ACROSS THAT FIELD."

Deacon Smith had worked against the election of two of them. Besides, there were some sixteen voters present in the room at that moment fiercely demanding an appropriation of thirty-seven dollars and thirty-five cents for a bridge over Squaw Creek.

They of course felt a vague interest in the boy. They listened impatiently to the deacon and then, the presiding judge having asked Bob if he wished to leave Burkett and go to the deacon, and having received a surprisingly emphatic negative, they dismissed the whole matter and turned their attention to real business.

Forthwith, Burkett led the boy into the Probate Court and, by means of much red tape, painstakingly unrolled, adopted him.

Then the pair marched proudly down the corridor and, coming out, found the deacon sitting dejectedly on the steps. At sight of him the boy paused abruptly.

"When I git big I'll kill ye. I'll kill ye!"

"Hush, Bob Jones!" Old Burkett chided fiercely, "ye dassent to kill 'cep-in' in war. Tell 'im ye'll pound the soup out of 'im."

"Then I'll pound the soup out o' ye. I'll pound the soup out o' ye!" The lad's voice echoed with unabated wrath.

At that the duck-hunter caught him up, and then, with a mighty swagger, quitted the courtyard.

That was the last effort made with a view of separating them. Under Old Burkett's tutelage, the lad grew to be an ungainly but very strong man, profoundly ignorant, and, of course, supremely disdainful of all things outside of his own little world.

In that narrow circle, however, he was really a genius. He shot, with a precision marvelous even among men brought up from childhood to the gun;

and as a fisherman, trapper, or boatman he was equally proficient. His attitude toward Old Burkett was also worth comment.

His readiness to obey that worthy was a constant reminder of that other famous Bob Jones of Pickett's charge, while the devotion that shone always from his brown eyes recalled the faithfulness of all those spaniels, which since the war had borne the name. In fact, save for two rather trivial personal interests—his hatred of Deacon Smith and an astonishing delight in his own silky and inconsequent whiskers, his whole thought and effort were for his guardian.

It would seem that all this devotion might have had an ennobling influence on its recipient, but it is a lamentable fact that Old Burkett never changed his ways one whit. Through all the years he scoffed at industry, other than his own; told wilder tales than ever of his prowess in the war; grew more quarrelsome with the world in general, and, since Bob's efforts brought more money, drank even more prodigiously.

Thus it happened that one sleeting day in March, the old man having gone to town for shot shells, returned to the camp with his pockets filled with bottles from Jack Renfro's drug-store instead, and going out to his shooting-pit in the afternoon did not return.

When Bob came in from running a line of mink traps that night, he went out there and found him, stiff and cold in death. He carried the body back to the tent and sat with it until day. Then, leaving the dog to watch, he ran all the way in to town. Quite out of breath, he entered the furniture-store and asked for a coffin, which he naively promised to pay for as soon as the shooting opened.

The dealer was a tight-fisted and unimaginative man. He scoffed at the idea of a sale on terms requiring him to wait for his money until wild geese and ducks, at that moment roaming over Florida or headed for Nova Scotia, for all he knew, should fly a thousand miles or more to Eiselman Bar with no other purpose in their fool heads than to get shot. Moreover, he was a brother-in-law to Deacon



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Smith. He dismissed the would-be customer and his proposal as preposterous.

Dismayed beyond description, Bob rushed down to Jack Renfro's drug-store and poured out his troubles there. Then Jack, though he was a flashy young fellow of rather doubtful morals—his drug-store was really a dive—straightway hastened to the furniture-store, and with his own money somewhat ostentatiously paid for a casket.

The gratitude of Old Burkett's protégée at this was pitiful. His further efforts to gather a crowd for funeral honors on behalf of his dead were, however, altogether fruitless. So he got the long box on his back and plodded alone across the fields to the camp.

Next morning he moved the tent. Where it had stood beneath the great sycamore, in a spot commanding a wide sweep of the river and the shooting grounds of Eiselman Bar, in the spot dearest of earth to Old Burkett, he dug the grave. There, with only the solemn spaniel looking on, he heaped the mound with loving care.

That afternoon he went back to town, and in the presence of the loafers congregated at the drug-store requested Renfro for "some writin's to put over the general's grave."

The crowd, of course, laughed, but Renfro, who was one of the best fellows on earth—extrinsically—inquired with a rare deference what it was that the epitaph should convey.

"I want it to say the facts. The general, he wuz a soldier, an' as brave as they ever wuz. He didn't fear nothin', nothin'." A titter ran round at this, whereupon Bob straightened his stooping shoulders and with a look of mild reproof on his rather vacuous face he concluded: "An' he wuz a mighty good man, fur he took me from tramps an' made me whut I am."

A shout greeted this, but Renfro, with a solemn wink at this and that chosen habitué of the place, tore a piece of wrapper from the roof at his elbow and then, getting out his pencil, bowed over the counter and wrote the following:

"General Burkett, age, place of birth and cause of death unknown. Claimed to have killed one hundred men in Pickett's charge. This is likely, for ever since

the war, wherever he has gone he has always left behind him a string of dead soldiers. His good works live after him. Witness Bob Jones, his mark."

He made Bob subscribe to it with a cross, after which he showed it to the crowd. Then amid the bedlam that went up, he got a big flask from behind the prescription case and proffered it to the guileless one.

"Ef it's booze," Bob declared slowly, "I don't want it. The general, he privately told me often, when he wuz sober, that ef it hadn't 'a' ben fur booze he might 'a' ben knowed fur a great man by more people than jist me an' hissef."

"All right, Bob," the druggist returned with unruffled suavity, for he was making sport to please the crowd. "I suppose now that the general is dead you'll quit the old river?"

"Nope. Jist keep on asame old way. When a feller has been brought up to a good business as I have he ort to stay with it. The general he allus 'lowed that he would have been a heap better off ef he had stayed with the army after the war. Ef he had, though, I never would 'a' run acrost 'im. It might 'a' ben better fur him, but it would a ben almighty tough on me."

At this even Renfro gave way to his long-pent laughter. Then, since he was beginning to feel some qualms, though they were, it must be admitted, vague ones, he passed over the paper.

Bob took it, and putting it carefully in the pocket of his flannel shirt, ambled out where the March sunshine soon drove all doubt from his simple mind.

Two or three days after that, when the wind had swung round to the east where great cloud-drifts lay, threatening storm, Deacon Smith, venerable now and softened by the years, but with his old-time ardor for shooting unabated, came down to the river for the sport that a rain would surely bring. His youngest son, a man of thirty, was with him.

As the two were passing the sycamore they noted that the tent was gone. Wherefore, in that curiosity that all men display in the presence of deserted home sites, they went to it and found old Burkett's grave, and above it Renfro's epitaph, tacked neatly on the shining bark.

Now the deacon did not comprehend that clause—"has always left behind him a string of dead soldiers," but the son did, and explained that it referred to Old Burkett's trail of empty bottles.

On a sudden then the old man saw in the ignorance that had suffered such a cruel joke a long-hoped-for opportunity to rescue the half-savage Bob. Moreover, his heart was strangely touched at the symbolism of Burkett's grave.

But by dint of much sober argument he was at last convinced of the trick that had been played upon the memory of his friend.

"All right," he admitted sadly, "I knowed they wuz somethin' wrong at the time, by the way they laughed. They hain't no one that's all good like the general wuz. I wisht I wuz with 'im."

"Oh, no," the deacon gently remonstrated from the depths of a sudden ab-



THEN HE SAT BOLT UPRIGHT, AND, WITH THE MATCHLESS STRENGTH OF HIS ARMS ALONE, ROWED IN A CUNNING FRENZY.

He forgot all about the shooting, and peering round soon discovered the new location of the tent. The two approached it and found its owner at home. He, of course, greeted them with his old-time curses.

"Who writ that epytaft?" the deacon demanded.

After a long silence Bob declared that, though it was nobody's business, Mr. Jack Renfro had been kind enough and fair enough to give the general his due.

straction, "you want to go to a better place than that."

Then after a silence he roused brightly and pursued, "You jist come on out on the bar with Jack an' me an' shoot awhile an' forgit your troubles. When we git back we'll write somethin' suitable fur Burkett."

"Couldn't ye do it now?"

"We better be a gittin' to the point," the deacon replied, as glancing out along the spit he saw geese and ducks already

swarming in above it, "the shootin' is a goin' to be somethin' wonderful. We kin write t. at any time. Git yer gun an' come."

"Nope, I guess not. I'd rather set an' think."

Moralizing, the pair hurried to the river bank, down it, and thence over the wide stretches of dead water.

Out on the very point of the bar the old man and the son dug their pits hastily, put out their decoys between the pits and the edge of the sands where the black waters of the main channel crinkled and sucked by, and then, with their faces set toward the shore across, they waited the return of the flock.

Presently rain began to fall, and the wind, that had been fresh and strong, now rose until it boomed mightily over the great valley. At that, the birds, blinded and beaten, hurtled in never-ending swarms overhead and swept down confusedly for the shelter of the spit. The deacon and his son stood up loading and firing with all their speed and skill; and in the mad excitement of the sport forgot all else.

It was just about noon that the clouds suddenly parted, the wind fell and the sun came out brightly and the birds all flew away. The hunters stared across the river, noted the wondrous lustre with which the farther shore shone, and then discovered that the waters had risen.

With a profound sigh, for this meant an end of the sport, the old man turned his head to look back over the way, very humanly anticipating his regret at departure, and was attempting to solace himself with a bit of philosophy concerning the brightness that comes after a storm, when on a sudden he gave vent to an exclamation strangely vehement for a deacon.

The bar, or rather a great portion of it lying between them and the shore, had disappeared. Where before for many years it had risen, now, a black tossing of waters swept, and at every moment grew wider. The Missouri had changed its course.

The two scrambled from their pits, and huddling together gazed with starting eyes as whole acres of the sands slipped down and sank away.

Presently from the bank, down which

they had scrambled in the morning, a skiff shot out. It came with speed toward them, but the cutting waters also came. The man in it bent himself far forward at each stroke, and then with braced feet hurled his whole weight upon the tether of his arms, and the oars with never a splash went up and down like the wings of a flying bird. Like a bird the boat skimmed on, but engulfment approached even swifter.

Then he sat bolt upright and, with the matchless strength of his arms alone, rowed in a cunning frenzy till the oars showed as but a rolling sheen, and the hull lifted until it seemed fairly to fly. Whereat the two who watched whirled up their caps and cheered mightily, for he was gaining now. Then, when the point on which they stood had fallen away to a space no wider than an oar length, he swung the boat alongside.

With a choke in his throat the deacon quavered, "Bob Jones, God Almighty is behind a man that kin row that way, but the boat won't hold us all."

For answer the boatman tumbled weakly out, and, gripping the painter tightly with both hands, cried in a commanding fury, "Git in. Git in." Wondering what further marvel of his craft he would display, whereby three men might ride to safety in a boat designed to bear but one, they blindly obeyed him.

Then he said, "I couldn't a got to ye with the big skift. But this'n will float ye till ye hit some bank." He flung the rope into the narrow prow and with a sturdy kick on the gunwale shoved off.

They caught the oars and wielded with all their strength to win back to him, but in the heart of the main channel of the Missouri, at flood-time the currents are mighty. When at last they faced the bow about, a score of boat lengths separated them from the dwindling circle at his feet.

From it he hailed simply, "They is no use, men. Three would sink the skift an' no man could live in this water even with a hang holt at the ster. Let 'er drift fur fear o' ice cakes floatin' down."

Then the last of the sands slowly settled and the dark and swift flood swept them remorselessly from view, but around him it seemed to rise gently, and gently it bore him down.